

## AFRL volunteer shows support to grieving teens

by Mike Wallace, Skywrighter Staff

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — Oak Tree Center is a nonprofit organization in Dayton that offers support for children and teens who have suffered the loss of loved ones through death. Staffed by volunteers, the center provides an atmosphere in which grieving clients can safely heal and begin to progress through their lives.

Karen Bahan, a contracting officer and branch chief in Air Force Research Laboratory's research and development contracting office, has volunteered as a group facilitator at Oak Tree Center for the past two years.

"I work with teens, 13 to 18 years old," she said. "I've seen them enter the program quiet and sad, but as they meet with peers and find out they're not the only ones (who've suffered losses), they open up and deal with the losses. Through friendships at the meetings, they begin to heal."

Support groups meet in the evening every two weeks during the school year, and meetings usually begin with a half-hour, informal pizza dinner. The clients then split up into groups of children and teens. As an icebreaker, the facilitator often has the participants state their names, ages, schools, and why they came to the meeting. Sometimes, the meetings include crafts and other activities as icebreakers. Bahan emphasized that each participant can choose to pass. "No one is ever forced to speak," she said.

"Parents have to show up. They have their own group. We break into age groups and each one has two or three facilitators."

There's no time limit for attending the meetings. Bahan said some clients need the support for six months, and some for two years or more. "There's no charge for participating in the group. Donations are accepted, but clients do not have to pay. And it's completely voluntary, so people can come for as long or as little as they want."

According to Bahan, facilitators encourage the members of the group to progress through the stages of grief. She said there are three tasks in grieving. The first is a thinking task, "I want to understand."

The second is an emotional and physical task, "I want to feel and express feelings about death."

The third is a practical task, "I want to reinvest back into life; I want to live fully in the present and look to the future."

She explained that people reach these levels at their own speeds and the time it takes is unpredictable.

Bahan said that the young children "express themselves and their feelings through play and activities. The meeting site has a 'volcano' room that's an outlet for very physical activities. The younger children 'act out' their feelings.

"The teens are more reserved and concerned about what their peers think," Bahan said. "To encourage them to talk, we play games sometimes. One is 'the ungame,' a board game that stimulates talk. (Also) sometimes we'll pass around a 'talking stick.' But the members of the group are always allowed to pass and say nothing. It's their choice. But it's such a small group of friends and everybody's in a similar situation. At some point, most people become talkative."

Bahan added that anything said in a group is regarded as confidential. Besides regular meetings, there are two group outings during the year. In the spring, the groups gather for a picnic, and launch balloons containing messages for loved ones. In the winter the group takes part in a candle lighting ceremony in honor of the deceased.

Clients usually come to the Oak Tree Center through referrals from friends, pastors, school nurses, teachers, psychologists, and social service workers. Although facilitators are not counselors or mental health professionals, they are trained to be good listeners.

One way they encourage the people in their groups to talk is through a strategy called reflective listening. Bahan explained reflective listening as reflecting back key words that a client has used to encourage him to continue speaking. "It's useful (for grieving children) to talk about their experiences," Bahan said. "It allows them to go through the grieving process and on to active participation in the rest of their lives. You definitely see the kids' progress."

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A civil servant since 1984, Bahan volunteered for three years at a similar facility in Washington D.C., before coming to Wright-Patterson. "I find (volunteering at the center) extremely rewarding," she said. "It's amazing what you can learn talking to these kids. You find out what's important in life such as the little things the clients remember that had a big effect on them."

"You hear depressing stories, but the work is not depressing."

Besides facilitating support groups, volunteers are needed to set up dinners, help with crafts, and do office work. The volunteer coordinator for Oak Tree Center, Vicki Braun, said facilitator training is given twice a year and reliability is emphasized.

For more information about Oak Tree Center, call 285-0199. @